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WASHINGTON, Nov. 1—These manhunts that Washington loves so much are morbidly fascinating. The town knows that they are at best unsporting, like a bush-league bullfight, and at their worst, obscene, like a public hanging; but it cannot resist them.

The reasons for this are as hard to explain as the Englishman's joy in cricket. Cricket expresses the English temperament; manhunting fulfills the Washingtonian. Memorable manhunts become historical watersheds. "The time they got Alger Hiss" immediately suggests a whole era of American history. This occurred just before "the time they got Owen Lattimore."

Then came "the time when Joe McCarthy got the State Department," "the time they got Joe McCarthy," "the time they got Sherman Adams," and "the time they got Charles van Doren." This year will doubtless be remembered as "the time they got Bobby Baker."

Opponents of Washington's manhunting are Favorite always objecting Sport that the sport is cruel and unfair.

Of course it is, but this explains only a small part of its peculiar fascination for this most peculiar town.

The typical manhunt begins with the wounding of the quarry. Politicians and newsmen rush out and plunge headlines into his quivering flanks. Trumpets proclaim him a violator of the conventional morality. The bullfight's opening knives merely weaken the beast for later killing, but the first blows of the manhunt usually destroy the quarry's character and reputation before the fun starts.

The town then settles back to watch him bleed and make book on whether he will go to prison. Misanthropes go about rejoicing in the renewed conviction that nobody is above mistrust, and town whispers inflate the victim's sins to loathsome proportion.

The charm of the really great manhunts lies in the strange emotional blend they produce in the spectator. From the bleachers, the hunted man becomes an object of both pity and contempt.

Invariably, he is a Pilloried pillar of rectitude and on respectability — like Trivia Hiss, Lattimore, Van Doren or Adams—and from Washington bleachers it is perversely satisfying to see rectitude

and respectability torn down. It sends the crowd home to cocktails happily confirmed in the sanctity of its own mediocrity.

If a victim like Owen Lattimore survives to prove that the whole hunt was a ghastly miscarriage of public morality, it doesn't really matter. Washington will say, as it still does of Lattimore, "If he hadn't been so snug with the committee we might not have ruined him quite so thoroughly."

In the average hunt, however, connoisseurs take keenest delight from noting how the quarry's commonplace human lapses are used to destroy him. When the Hiss Hunt was on, for example, it seemed very sinister that Hiss could not remember housefurnishing details of a home he had lived in a decade earlier.

Most men, of course, can't remember how their wives had the parlor furniture arranged last summer and they know that a clever Senator could ruin them for such a memory lapse. The vicuna coat given Adams by his pushy friend, Goldfine, has its counterpart in the thousands of innocent gifts that change hands here every Christmas.

What man doesn't know that they are innocent? Yet, who would want to defend them in headlines?

Bobby Baker, it is You Can't charged, used his Sen-Hang ate clerical position to Them All improve private income.

If true, this cannot be excused by the fact that Congressmen do the same thing, but the fact helps keep the affair in proper perspective. In its fury, however, the hunt was expanded into innuendo about Baker's private club where, it is whispered, the waitresses wore black net stockings.

This sounds ugly, but as every clean-cut boy who has ever been to Cape Canaveral knows, the American obsession with black net stockings has reached a pitch where grandmothers have to wear them if they want work hustling beer. How many habitués of the Cape would want to answer headlines charging that they had had beer from grandmas in black net hose?

And so the ultimate spectator appeal of the manhunt is a little clearer. Everyone in the bleachers who has lived as people do in the mid-20th century realizes that he is just as vulnerable as the man in the witness chair. Somebody has to pay. The man in the bleachers thanks his stars that the bounds have not chosen him.

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